

A Transgressing Welcome
Michael Swartzentruber
Luke
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Last week we looked to the Hebrew Scriptures and the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, who were looking to give welcome to strangers and receiving unexpected news from God. And we explored “welcome” (our theme for June) through the lens of Sarah's laughter. Today we turn to a rather famous parable of Jesus given in the midst of a conversation, of sorts, with a religious lawyer. Hear now a Word of the Lord.

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37 Pg. 1612

Pray with me: “God of Mercy, bless this reading; bless our ears that hear it, help our minds to understand it, our hearts to receive it, and our souls to be transformed by it. Grant to me Your Truth in the words of my mouth, this morning. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, *amen.*”

When Rebecca and I settled into our new apartment as a married couple, one of the things we purchased for our place was a doormat. Truth be told, it was one of the less difficult decisions we made as a couple about what to buy for our apartment... as some of you may know, agreeing on home furnishings with your spouse or significant other can be a tall order. Fortunately, after trying to agree on a couch, the doormat issue seemed like a walk in the park.

But, on the other hand, it still wasn't entirely easy. We wanted something that would mark out the entrance to our new home as inviting and sincere place... and, of course, functionally useful.

Here are some doormats we did not choose:

“Come in.”

“Come back with a warrant.”

“Hi, I'm Mat.”

“Wow, Nice Underwear.”

“Remember to Wipe.”

One of my favorites, but a little wordy—this is a diary entry from a dog: “The Dog, Day 751: My captors continue to torment me with bizarre rubber squeak toys. They eat lavish meals in my presence while I am forced to subsist on dry cereal. The only thing that keeps me going is the hope of eventual escape... that, and the satisfaction I get from occasionally ruining some piece of furniture. I fear I may be going insane.”

What we chose was a doormat with the simple word “welcome.” Nothing too elaborate or witty, but we hoped this would reflect our attitude toward visitors at the threshold of our home, at the boundary between the world outside and our apartment.

And I want to suggest to you all, today, that such a place is where our Scripture story takes place... our exploration of “welcome,” through this story, takes us to the boundaries.

Often, we see this parable as a challenge for us to be like the Good Samaritan. We ask ourselves, “Am I willing to be a true neighbor? Would *I* help someone when a difficult situation comes along? Would I risk *myself* to be a good Samaritan?”

While I think these questions are probably part of the package of this rich story, I wonder if Jesus isn't doing something else here too.

Our Scripture reading takes place as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And on his way he is confronted by a religious lawyer who, it seems, did not like what Jesus was teaching. He attempts to expose Jesus as a fool, but Jesus turns the lawyer's question back on him. "What should one do to inherit eternal life? Well, what do you think?" So the lawyer quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures: "Love God with heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus agrees. Having come up short in exposing Jesus thus far, he has another plan. He knows of the many scholarly debates over the definition of "my neighbor." And so the lawyer forces Jesus to define his terms: "Be precise, O teacher, who, exactly, is my neighbor?"

Rather than offer a dry definition, Jesus turns to a parable. Now the setting for this story is a notoriously dangerous road between Jericho and Jerusalem. This road was well-known in Jesus's day for two reasons: first, it was a very treacherous path descending from a high elevation. Second, bandits and robbers were always hiding along the many curves and mugged countless travelers.

Not only was the setting familiar to those who heard this story, but the way this story flows followed a well-known convention of the time. If a story has a series of three events, then we should expect that the first two are incorrect ways of acting and the third breaks the pattern set by the first two. Almost like those jokes you hear, "so a rabbi, a priest, and pastor walk into a bar..." we know the first two will do something one way, and the third will come along and do something stupid and funny.

Just like those roles in a joke, there are typical roles in these parables. It was common to use a Priest, a Levite, and an Israelite as the characters, with the Israelite breaking the incorrect pattern of the Priest and Levite.

So Jesus tells a familiar kind of story about a well-known road, an un-named traveler, and a predictable

mugging that leaves the traveler helpless and wounded on the side of the road. As expected, a Priest walks along and passes him by, moving to the opposite side of the road. Then, as we might anticipate, a Levite shows up only to do the same thing. A pattern emerges of seeing this body, broken and hurting on the road, and walking along without showing mercy or kindness. Then comes our Israelite... **wait, a Samaritan!?!?**

Talk about unexpected, the unclean, foul, detested Samaritan is the hero. This filthy figure is who will show us what is true? Jesus asks, “which of these three men do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” You can almost see just how unthinkable this would have been by the way the lawyer responds to Jesus' question. The lawyer can't even say the word “Samaritan.” Instead, he simply says, grudgingly, “The one who had mercy on him...” And, ironically, this is exactly the point Jesus was trying to make.

Yes, this is a story about kindness and mercy, about true neighborliness, but it is about these things in a way we might not expect—the hearers of this story sure wouldn't have seen this coming. Who can show us what is true? Who can be a person acting rightly before God? You mean a Samaritan? It cuts down some pretty well fortified boundaries of the time—the boundaries between Jew and Samaritan.

From the Jewish perspective, Jews were God's insiders and clean and Samaritans were outsiders and unclean. The Samaritans were descendants of mixed marriages. As our Scripture reading from Hosea this morning indicates, the prophets and biblical writers had a particular distaste for Samaria.

Samaritans had, in the eyes of many Jews, transgressed the laws of God and fallen from religious purity. And so there was bitter religious and social hatred between Jews and Samaritans, a kind of racism... there was no such thing in the Jewish imagination as a “*good Samaritan*.” That was an oxymoron. There was a firm barrier between Jew and Samaritan, between good and evil, that was not to

be transgressed—you did not cross that line. And yet, it was in this context that Jesus uses the Samaritan to teach the truth of neighborliness.

I can only imagine what kind of person fits that description for us today? Who do we despise, find to be unclean or evil? Who couldn't *possibly* show us what is true about life?

Jesus is pushing the boundaries of welcome because welcoming happens precisely at the boundary, at the boundary between inside and outside, between “us” and “them.” Welcome is the practice of making the outsider the insider, of opening of the inside to the outside. Welcome transgresses the boundaries we so often operate with.

This is where we find doormats, right? They sit at the boundary between the inside of our homes and the outside world, and they can convey a message about how we see that boundary functioning... as a rigid barrier, or as a permeable entry-way. A doormat reading “welcome” invites what is outside inside. It opens up a point of transgression, where the outside can go beyond the barrier and move into the inside. But, that is a dangerous, vulnerable place... what if we don't like what is on the outside... what if we think it's evil, or vile; after all, that was the status of the Samaritan in the eyes of many Jews at that time...

So what would our doormats say? Would they say “please wipe,” meaning “you must be clean before you can enter”? Would they say go away, our place is fine just the way it is, without you? Would they say “welcome”?

“Of course!” we say... we would give welcome. We would open ourselves up... really? Would we?

We can test our “welcome” mats this morning with a simple exercise. Who are the characters in this story, can we name them all? Who are the ones that catch our attention and stay in our minds? Is there a character or a set of characters we skim right over and fail to remember, think about, or search out for a word of truth? Well, there is the Priest, the Levite, and the Good Samaritan, of course. Our cast of three. Then there is the un-named traveler, yes. Oh, the religious lawyer asking Jesus the questions... hmm... the inn-keeper? No, who do we forget about... who failed to touch our hearts... oh yeah, the robbers. Those age-old rotten scum bags.

If we claim that we are welcoming in the spirit of this parable, then maybe we should return to the story, and give some descriptors to the unknown man, wounded on the side of the road. What if, instead of an innocent traveler, he was actually one of the characters so often forgotten in this story... what if he was actually a robber, one of the many bandits along that road? Fresh from mugging another traveler himself, what if he was heading down the mountain with a sack of loot before being jumped by another gang on that road? What if his status as “innocent” in our eyes changed...?

The Priest would likely walk-by and see this “un-churched” man, see his unrepentant and wicked heart, and claim he has made his own bed in hell. After all, we reap what we sow, right? And he would walk on by. The Levite, would then approach. He had a sister who was mugged on this road just the other day, serves this filthy robber right, he got what he deserved. Such foul people. He would walk on by.

Now comes the Good Samaritan... but wait... its not the Samaritan. No, that's who we would expect today... no, it's someone else... who is it? He looks bloody and beaten down, wearing only the shreds of tattered clothes... his hands and feet look mauled, and his head... there is a crown of thorns. He limps over to the robber who lies lifeless on the side of the road. And he tenderly bandages his wounds. Then with great effort, he picks him up, and carries him down the road.... where is he taking him, to the

inn? Yes, the one called Resurrection.

“Who was the neighbor to this man?” With the eyes of faith we would answer, “Jesus Christ.” Good.

Now you know true welcome. Go and do likewise.

Amen.